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Implementing a Remedial English Program at the Language Center of Kwansei Gakuin University

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Abstract

In April, 2017, the Language Center at Kwansei Gakuin University implemented a remedial English program, titled Introduction English. Developing and implementing the program was a laborious and challenging process. This paper explains many of the considerations that guided the implementation, details the implementation itself, reports on longitudinal student self-assessments of their English development, and then speculates on potential hurdles facing the program moving forward.

I. Introduction

In April, 2016, I, in my role as Intensive English Program (IEP) Coordinator, was informed that the Language Center (LC) of Kwansei Gakuin University (KGU) would be expanding its educational mission. Previously, the LC functioned primarily to educate only the most proficient or motivated students from participating departments. Qualifying students were able to opt-in to a thrice-a-week, two-semester Intensive English (IE) course that would satisfy their English education requirements. Additionally, students were offered a series of elective courses to supplement their educational or personal language requirements. The new course, titled “Introduction English” or “Intro,” began in April, 2017.

The expansion of the LC mission was a considerable alteration. Instead of focusing on the needs of only the most proficient and motivated students, a new series of remedial English courses was to be established. These courses would serve stu-

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dents whose English ability wasn't high enough for them to function in standard departmental English courses. For students who failed to meet a high enough English proficiency, the new course was to be mandatory, the first mandatory course taught in the history of the Language Center.

Teaching low-level students who did not volunteer to take Language Center classes was a new challenge, and implementing a program designed to meet the needs of those students required a great deal of preparation and teamwork. This document details the issues surrounding the implementation as well as the results of the first semester of the new remedial courses. This report will end with some speculation on the future of the Introduction English classes.

II. Course specifics

Intro is designed to focus on students' remedial English education in their first and then second year. The course is divided into 'A' and 'B' classes. 'A' classes focus on listening and speaking and are taught by full-time native-speaker contract lecturers while 'B' classes focus on reading and writing and are taught by full-time Japanese contract lecturers. The course is also divided between first-year students (who are placed in "Intro-I") and second-year students (who progress into "Intro-II"). Students need to pass both the 'A' and 'B' sections of both semesters of Intro I in order to move on to Intro II. Should a student pass both 'A' and 'B' sections of both semesters of Intro I and Intro II, she or he has completed the program, thereby satisfying the English requirements of her or his department.

The numerical breakdown of students gives an understanding to the rationale behind the remedial initiative. Each section of Intro I and Intro II has approximately 20-22 students. Students in, for example, Intro I-A section two are the same students in Intro I-B section two. In total, all 10 sections of Intro I contain roughly 200 students. When Intro II commences in April 2018, the total number of Intro students (both first and second-year) will be around 400. With roughly 400 of the lowest-proficiency students taking Intro, and around 750 of the highest proficiency students taking IE, participating departments can focus their English instruction efforts on students who are in the middle. In theory, this new sorting of students in accordance to their proficiency should allow the departments to better anticipate and meet student needs in classroom instruction.

III. Coordination and implementation

Instituting coordination is an endeavor fraught with difficulty, particularly in Japan. In comparison to American second-language programs, Japanese EFL pro-

grams tend to have high levels of teacher autonomy, both in the general sense as well as with regard to curricula (Prichard & Moore, 2016 a). Because the backgrounds of foreign instructors in Japanese universities are so diverse, there are considerable differences between individuals with regard to preferred methodologies (Nagatomo, 2009). The wide range of differences of opinion often can create friction between instructors (Goodman, 2009). Further compounding the difficulty associated with implementing a coordinated curriculum is the typically transient nature of the instructors. Due to their generally non-tenured status, frequent turnover in instructors and program coordinators is a significant factor in why Japanese foreign language programs tend to be more uncoordinated than programs from other countries (Prichard, 2006).

That said, implementing a coordinated program in an effectively uncoordinated context, when done cautiously, is feasible. A potentially effective method is a compromise often referred to as “curricular coordination”: instructor autonomy is granted as long as learning objectives are being met (Prichard & Moore, 2016 b). And, as long as the dual goals of a coordinated curriculum—consistency and continuity—are being met, instructors can be granted a great deal of leeway in planning and executing their lessons (English, 2010). Another aspect to aid the implementation of a coordinated program is to steer away from a “top-down” approach; basically, inviting the instructors into the planning and administration process makes them an even greater stakeholder than they otherwise would be (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

With this in mind, a plan to implement the new Intro program was developed. To begin, a steering committee of four people was created. The first person in this committee is the Remedial Instructor (RI). This person is in charge of managing the ‘B’ sections of Intro English. The second and third persons added to the steering committee are two Special Instructors of Language (SIL). These people are in charge of planning and coordinating the ‘A’ sections of Intro. The final person in the steering committee is the IEP Program Coordinator, who is responsible for facilitating communication between the RI and the SILs as well as ensuring the educational objectives as specified by the English Education Committee are being met. In the coming year (AY 2018), a second RI will be added to the steering committee as the program expands to cover second year students in Intro II.

Given the unique nature of the course, it was realized early on that a heightened degree of coordination would be a necessity. Generally speaking, courses at the LC aren’t very coordinated. While course goals and objectives have been set, instructors are generally granted considerable autonomy with regard to lesson planning, textbook selection, and grading. Until the implementation of Intro, only the IE course had any restriction on textbook selection and grading distribution, and those

restrictions have been very loosely policed. For the new Intro course, however, factors which require greater coordination became apparent.

Firstly, while guidance given to the Language Center from the various departments with regard to the implementation of the Intro program has been minimal, we were told that ‘A’ sections and ‘B’ sections need to be connected in some unspecified way. Since all ‘B’ sections are (at least initially) to be taught by one instructor while all ‘A’ sections are taught by a number of foreign instructors, devising ways of establishing continuity between the sections proved difficult. The only effective way of creating some semblance of consistency between ‘A’ sections and continuity between ‘A’ and ‘B’ sections was to establish an element of uniform coordination.

Secondly, after lengthy consideration into the likely disposition of Intro students, it was speculated that students in the Intro courses might be more likely to register complaints than their non-Intro counterparts. While most LC students are highly motivated and eager to learn English, incoming Intro students were predicted to be generally unlikely to share the same excitement. Should students in one section decide that students in another section were beneficiaries of “easier” instruction, the fear was that the risk of student complaints might rise, well beyond the risk presented by the normally compliant and content students in standard LC courses. Thus, it was decided that Intro A instructors needed to coordinate with each other, at least minimally, so that students who might already be inclined toward dissatisfaction would be less likely to have legitimate reasons to feel victims of unfair treatment based on their section placement.

While being guided by concerns for student needs, the planning for Intro was also guided by concerns for instructor morale as well. LC instructors have grown accustomed to teaching highly-motivated students in contexts of considerable instructor autonomy. Feelings toward the expansion of the LC to include teaching lower-level students in less autonomous conditions ranged from stoic resignation to open discontent.

In an effort to remedy this, Intro instructors were invited to involve themselves in the planning and implementation of the new course. In the months before the semester began, an effort was made to shift from a “top-down” model of coordination to an open collaboration between the administration of the steering committee and the instructors who’d be teaching the courses themselves. Before the semester began, instructors were asked to review and then vote on a shared textbook for each section of Intro I-A. Additionally, instructors were asked to help decide a weekly syllabus as well as which elements would be present in the course’s policy statement. Throughout the semester, instructor feedback was elicited which helped guide planning for the fall semester. And between the spring and fall semesters, Intro instructors created a task bank of suitable classroom activities for each upcoming

chapter.

While working hard to elicit and respond to instructor feedback, the members of the steering committee, particularly the RI and the SILs, also strove to improve coordination. In particular, a series of vocabulary lists and subsequent quizzes were developed. These lists contained words found in chapters of textbooks from both Intro I-A and Intro I-B, and flashcard software was made available for student use. The shared vocabulary list has become a strong element of connection between Intro A and Intro B as students' grasp of the vocabulary is assessed in both classes.

IV. Results

Gauging the initial results of the implementation of the Intro program is a difficult task. Both student and instructor satisfaction surveys were conducted by members of the steering committee, and results from those surveys are likely being presented for publication elsewhere. Additionally, the placement exam, GTEC, which was used for determining which students would take Intro could be taken again when students are finished with Intro I or Intro II to provide longitudinal data as to the efficacy of the program with regard to language proficiency. Whether or not funds exist to finance such an assessment is unclear.

Another way of determining efficacy of the program is through student self-confidence assessments. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is an internationally-recognized standard commonly used to describe the ability levels of language learners in a variety of different areas. In 2004, a JSPS Grant-In-Aid for Scientific Research was awarded to a team lead by Ikuo Koike. The goal of the project was to adapt the CEFR to be more reflective of Japanese contexts. In 2012, the CEFR-J Version 1 was completed, with a can-do descriptor database tailored to more accurately reflect Japanese language learners (Negishi, 2013).

The CEFR-J can-do descriptor database was adapted into a Google Form, and all Intro I students of each section were asked to complete the CEFR-J self-assessment at the beginning and the end of the Spring 2017 semester. Section by section results are presented in Table 1 below, and comprehensive results for all sections are presented in Table 2:

Table 1

Section 1	Listening	Reading	Spoken Int.	Spoken Prod.	Writing	Total
05.01.2017	4.39	4.50	4.56	4.56	3.89	4.40 (A1.3)
07.10.2017	5.24	5.24	4.71	4.88	4.76	4.96 (A2.1)
% Change	19%	16%	3%	7%	22%	13%
Section 2	Listening	Reading	Spoken Int.	Spoken Prod.	Writing	Total
05.01.2017	3.53	4.11	3.68	3.32	4.63	3.90 (A1.3)
07.10.2017	4.61	4.78	4.44	4.22	5.56	4.72 (A2.1)
% Change	31%	16%	21%	27%	20%	21%
Section 3	Listening	Reading	Spoken Int.	Spoken Prod.	Writing	Total
05.05.2017	4.25	4.81	3.56	3.88	4.25	4.15 (A1.3)
07.11.2017	4.94	5.24	4.38	4.53	5.41	4.90 (A2.1)
% Change	16%	9%	23%	17%	27%	18%
Section 4	Listening	Reading	Spoken Int.	Spoken Prod.	Writing	Total
05.03.2017	4.50	4.89	4.53	4.41	4.89	4.64 (A2.1)
07.12.2017	4.88	5.29	5.00	5.00	5.24	5.08 (A2.1)
% Change	8%	8%	10%	13%	7%	9%
Section 5	Listening	Reading	Spoken Int.	Spoken Prod.	Writing	Total
05.04.2017	4.17	4.17	4.06	3.72	4.44	4.11 (A1.3)
07.13.2017	4.42	4.58	4.16	4.11	4.74	4.40 (A1.3)
% Change	6%	10%	2%	10%	7%	7%
Section 6	Listening	Reading	Spoken Int.	Spoken Prod.	Writing	Total
04.11.2017	3.38	3.67	2.95	3.24	3.48	3.34 (A1.2)
07.10.2017	4.52	5.67	4.71	4.67	4.90	4.90 (A2.1)
% Change	34%	54%	60%	44%	41%	47%
Section 7	Listening	Reading	Spoken Int.	Spoken Prod.	Writing	Total
04.28.2017	4.31	4.44	4.13	4.00	4.81	4.34 (A1.3)
07.7.2017	5.00	5.37	5.11	4.84	5.58	5.18 (A2.1)
% Change	16%	21%	24%	21%	16%	19%
Section 8	Listening	Reading	Spoken Int.	Spoken Prod.	Writing	Total
04.28.2017	2.48	2.90	2.14	2.19	2.71	2.49 (A1.1)
07.12.2017	3.81	4.86	3.81	3.62	4.00	4.02 (A1.3)
% Change	54%	68%	78%	65%	48%	61%
Section 9	Listening	Reading	Spoken Int.	Spoken Prod.	Writing	Total
05.05.2017	4.44	5.39	4.06	3.78	4.89	4.51 (A2.1)
07.11.2017	5.17	5.63	4.58	4.74	5.16	5.05 (A2.1)
% Change	16%	4%	13%	25%	6%	12%
Section 10	Listening	Reading	Spoken Int.	Spoken Prod.	Writing	Total
05.03.2017	4.35	5.26	4.74	4.87	4.87	4.82 (A2.1)
07.12.2017	5.00	6.00	5.36	5.50	5.86	5.55 (A2.2)
% Change	15%	14%	13%	13%	20%	15%

Table 2

Overall	Listening	Reading	Spoken Int.	Spoken Prod.	Writing	Total
SEM. START	3.98	4.41	3.84	3.8	4.29	4.07 (A1.3)
SEM. FINISH	4.76	5.27	4.63	4.61	5.12	4.88 (A2.1)
% Change	20%	20%	21%	21%	19%	20%

V. Discussion

The data in Tables 1 and 2 seem to indicate growth in Intro students' self-assessed confidence. Section 8 students reported the greatest amount of positive change in confidence while students in Section 5 reported the least amount of positive change. Overall, students reported a 20% growth in confidence, distributed fairly evenly across the CEFR-J categories.

VI. Limitations

While it's tempting to think of the collected CEFR-J data as a reflection of skill levels achieved, the CEFR-J Self-Assessment isn't clear reflection of actual student ability. More than anything else, it's a general index of student *confidence* on the day they took the self-assessment. Students feeling particularly confident might be more generous in their reflection of their abilities than students who aren't feeling confident on that day.

Also problematic might be the way student scores were assessed. In most sections, completing the CEFR-J self-assessment was assigned as homework. Students who forgot might have simply marked scores randomly in the closing minutes before class began. Additionally, students who felt a greater affinity to their instructors might've been more inclined to be generous in their self-assessment in an effort to boost their teacher's morale.

Finally, it should be stated that the data collected would best be evaluated through more rigorous statistical analysis. Perhaps future treatment of this data will include such measurements.

VII. The future of Introduction English

Looking toward the future of Introduction English, a looming challenge remains the expansion of the program's second level, Intro II. While consistency between 'A' sections and the connection between 'A' and 'B' sections has been a factor of consideration, a new factor of consideration will be continuity between Intro I and Intro II. Presumably, with the addition of a new RI in April, 2018, one RI and

one SIL can manage Intro I, while the other RI and SIL can manage Intro II. That said, it's possible that members of the steering committee might prefer a different separation of duties, and discussions still need to be held on the matter.

Another issue remains the use of the GTEC as the primary determining factor of a student's placement into Intro. While the GTEC is a convenient assessment of student ability in that students can take the test in the comfort of their own homes, there is a possibility that others might take the test for them so as to boost a student's likelihood of testing into a higher-proficiency English course. Conversely, if students fear being placed into a high-proficiency English course, they might intentionally do poorly on the GTEC in the hopes that they will be placed in a lower, easier English course, thereby reducing their homework time and increasing their cumulative grade average.

One strategy to counter this is the establishment of a median-referenced grading standard so that each section has an average score of 75%. This policy, however, is highly controversial as it tends to add even more power to the GTEC assessment: not only does the test place the students, it also plays a large factor in the students' grade at the end of the semester. Another controversial aspect of median-referenced grading standard is the further diminution of instructor autonomy in that instructors are no longer free to give scores as they see fit. Under this constraint, some instructors might feel less inclined to motivate listless students or give fair grades to students who excel too much in the course.

VIII. Conclusion

Implementing Introduction English has been a considerable challenge, and it's altered the Language Center in surprising ways. In order to accommodate the 10 koma of Intro (20 koma starting in April, 2018), the LC had to cut a matching number of its normal elective course offerings. The hope is that the reduction of high-level elective options will boost enrolment in the remaining electives, but it has yet to be seen if that silver-lining will materialize. The changes in the LC brought by Intro have been challenging to overcome, but, due to the hard work of the RI and two SILs on the steering committee, as well as the tireless efforts of the instructors who both co-coordinate and teach the course, the implementation of Introduction English appears to have been, so far, successful.

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